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How Covid Broke Reality

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I've got to get something off my chest.

Earlier this week this person (a consultant doctor in the UK's NHS who posts about covid) tweeted this.

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It's hard to believe the virus isn't playing a direct role in host manipulation currently to succeed
9:48 PM · Oct 9, 2024 · 54.4K Views

They followed this tweet up with this one.

Prognostic Chats @PrognosticChats · Oct 9
It feels almost pathological though, to have gone from clapping for frontline workers to actively putting them (and everyone) at needless risk. It is unsettlingly illogical.
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Lots of people retweeted it.

These posts were in a similar vein to many others I've seen over the last few years baffled at the way *people* responded to the pandemic.

I'm going to be honest about what this says to me.

It says that too few people who consider themselves informed, clever, rational, *followers of science*, have spent any time thinking about how bad things happen and why.

It suggests to me a certain amount of privilege in your circumstances and life experiences.

My brain kind of translates it as *how did I, a white person in the global north, where I thought we had our shit together, end up living in such an irrational society?*

As if rationality (as determined by *information*) has always been the default setting. As if the singular thing that can explain bad things, things of which I have rarely experienced, must be bad information! Must be viral host manipulation!

This way of thinking is directly linked to ideas of information and, crucially,

*mis*information as the ultimate societal evil.

Here's a fact check for you: social behaviour is not determined by volume of information.

If this was the case there would be no climate change.

Because despite the fossil fuel industry's campaign of lies and distortion, the majority of people have, for 50 years, accepted that climate change is caused by the burning of fossil fuels and other industrial activity. The belief percentages have ebbed and flowed, but it's never been a minority.

For 50 years climate change has been a majority belief across the world.

US presidents from Carter to Bush to Biden have made climate policy a priority, at least rhetorically. (Of course they can never actually detach capitalist empire from fossil fuels, which is where it all breaks down).

Anyway, climate change, despite the fossil fuel industry's campaign, *has actually never been that controversial.*

But despite this solid consensus, what's happened? More fossil fuels have been burned every year, more industrial activity has happened every year, more animals have been slaughtered and more forests chopped down.

We watched as highly calibrated sensors recorded increases of CO2 every year, we watched a climate revert to a state not experienced for millions of years, and we watched the weather change.

The information didn't matter. Doesn't matter.

Because *people* live in society. We live within political, economic and institutional structures that largely determine for us how much climate change we, individually, are responsible for.

Your home and your office is connected to the grid. If that is a fossil fuelled grid, you have no control over the most substantial chunk of your emissions. Live in the suburbs?

Have a disability? Need to leave your house?

You need to drive.

Have family you need to visit in a place that isn't serviced by a train?

You need to fly.

Have a metabolic system that requires the intake of calorific energy and can't grow your daily 2000+ calorie energy needs?

You need to buy food in plastic from a shop, probably sprayed with pesticides.

Live in an empire with a huge fossil fuelled military?

Your taxes support the output of massive carbon emissions.

Take other crises. Homelessness, hunger. We knows there's enough money and enough food, but still.

Genocide? We know. But still.

The information didn't matter. The information doesn't matter!

The idea that it's not the quality and volume of information that really matters is a difficult realisation for those wedded to ideals of rationality as *the* social-political-economic determinant.

It's why many are fixated on mis/disinformation as the evil from which all bad things flow. Why many believe we're just a few Snopes articles or BBC fact checks away from enlightened rationality.

If only we got the right information out to *the people*!

Back to that original tweet.

There were loads of headlines about covid's impact on the brain in 2020.

Loads and loads and loads!

Guess what? The information changed the behaviour *only while the structures were in place to facilitate that behaviour change*!

Mask mandates, furlough, work from home, remote schooling etc enabled a shift in individual behaviour for a while. Individuals did not determine that behaviour change. Those with the power to shape how we interact with each other did.

We clapped for frontline workers because we woke up every day to updated daily pandemic death tolls. We logged on and read the latest news about the spread of the virus. We read about new lockdowns and travel restrictions. We read about the latest hospital that was overwhelmed. We read about mass graves. Every social and cultural input that shapes our understanding of the world was signalling crisis mode. This signalling being clear, we recognised who was, in that oft-repeated phrase, *on the frontlines.*

Our behaviour at the time was *contingent not organic.*

Then people got vaccinated, the structures reverted, and, for most people, that was that. The information of 2020 was superseded by new information about a lower threat subsequent to omicron and vaccines, and the need to resume the activity of living where we had left off. Kids had to go back to schools, people had to go back to work and the economy inevitably and only could resume its prior routines *on the rails already laid down.*

Individuals had little control over whether they then got covid. They'd done the one thing they were told they needed to do and **the structural supports that had enabled many people to stay free from the virus were removed.**

No viral host manipulation required.

That being said, covid ***has*** broken everyone's brain.

Not because of viral host manipulation, or even bad information per se, but because so many people, wherever they place themselves on the political spectrum, **lack an**

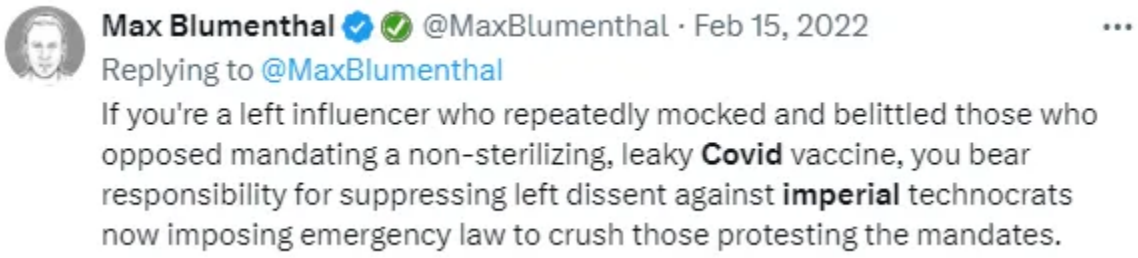
analytical framework through which to feed the last four years.

Under conditions of depoliticisation, people either reach for conspiracies or mould their understanding of events into long-standing explanations of the world. This goes as much for centrists and even some leftists as it does for the right.

Centrists famously lack the ability to see the world through prisms of imperial capitalist power, leftists see imperial capitalist power behind every crisis, and the right see manufactured threats to a loosely defined freedom as behind every crisis.

Prognistic Chats' tweet falls within the first category, a centrist approach to understanding covid that places the blame not on systemic factors but on a never-defined but lumpen *people* who just need better information.

An example of a covid-pilled leftist is someone like Max Blumenthal, a person who overlayed their (often correct) anti-imperial analysis of the world onto covid, and got covid wrong as a result.


Max Blumenthal @MaxBlumenthal · Feb 15, 2022
Replying to @MaxBlumenthal
If you're a left influencer who repeatedly mocked and belittled those who opposed mandating a non-sterilizing, leaky Covid vaccine, you bear responsibility for suppressing left dissent against imperial technocrats now imposing emergency law to crush those protesting the mandates.

I don't need to show you examples of covid-pilled freedom gobbling right-wingers.

That isn't to say there aren't *elements* of truth to each analysis.

What the centrists get right is that a lot of people do ignore legitimate threats. What they get wrong is that this isn't primarily due to the quantity or volume of (mis/dis) information, but because structures of (yes, capitalist) society largely determine our behaviours. And these behaviours are rational, not irrational.

Leftists like Blumenthal get the capitalist structures bit right, but failed to recognise that sometimes a crisis really is just a crisis, even when it's an imperial capitalist

government telling you so.

The right mostly got it all wrong because they look at capitalism and see socialism. Vaccine passes weren't some nefarious globalist elite plot to *take away* consumptive freedom, they were the product of the neoliberal managerial brain who believes doing science super hard is the way to *maintain* consumptive freedoms.

Got the vaccine pass? Then you have done a science and are free to consume, to go to the bar, to the show, to the restaurant.

The upshot of all of this is a *general unmooring of minds.*

For some people covid is everywhere, for most people covid is nowhere. For some people every sudden death or young adult cancer is covid, for some people its the vaccine. Covid is a plot to depopulate the world. The vaccines are a plot to depopulate the world.

This unmooring has created a greater level of distrust across society than ever before.

One in three people are less likely to believe official information because of how government and media acted during the first two years of covid. One in four people in the UK believe covid was a hoax.

We don't trust experts, we don't trust governments, we don't trust the media, we don't trust each other.

And the messed up thing is that there are good reasons for this mistrust, whatever your particular gripe.

Experts did oversell vaccines, vaccine passes were nonsensical, the media did flip from crisis to normality at a dizzying speed, people will still give you covid and long covid! But government lockdowns also saved millions of lives, vaccines saved millions, and not everyone at all times will give you covid and long covid!

We're unmoored.

Covid shifted something on a physical and metaphysical level.

Physical because the virus really is still here and really will still harm you.

More people *are* more sick than before.

Metaphysical because of all the ways covid interfered with belief systems, pushed people towards conspiracy and accelerated mistrust in authority.

Then there's the interaction of the physical and metaphysical.

More people are sick but the nature of the reality is contested.

And as it is contested, we're all fighting to establish *the proper flow of correct information* that can resolve the problem.

I don't absolve myself here, by the way. Not at all.

And if the information I and others provide helps change behaviour, great, but it won't turn the ship around.

Because information, the quality, the volume, the lack the mis or the dis of it, is not, in the end, what controls the ship.

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Maggie JK 17 mins ago

I was going to sit here and write that the main difference between calling medical providers heroes and clapping for them versus treating them as disposable would be the different administrations, and the current one is supposed to be the good guy or at least the lesser evil.

But then I reminded myself that you're talking about the UK, But I'm still gonna go ahead and blame the Biden administration for this. The US has been trying to normalize Covid since the beginning. Maybe the UK was doing it first but I'm still gonna go ahead and blame Biden for this.

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Ross Ion Coyle Vulgar Earth 7 mins ago

I completely empathize. There was a lot of dark money (combined with egomaniacal tendencies) behind the so-called "anti-vax, anti-lock down" 'left' influencers.

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